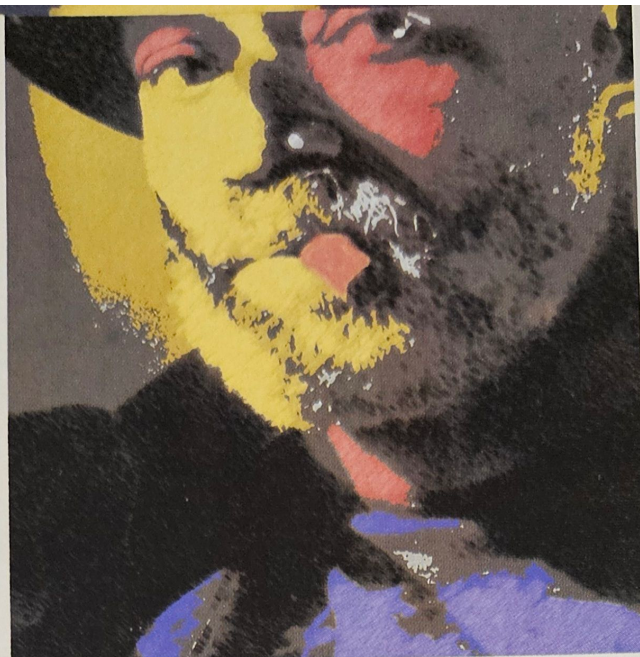


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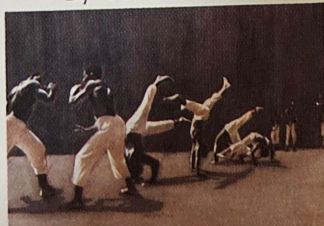
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MELVIN VAN PEEBLES REEL LIFE!!

BY MARIANNE RUUTH

Once Melvin Van Peebles inhabited an executive suite at Columbia Studios in Hollywood. On the wall, a sign proclaimed: PLEASE, FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY, DON'T TRY TO UNDERSTAND ME TOO FUCKING QUICKLY.

In response to questions concerning black films, current black film makers, politics, and our society, he quoted Edward Murrow: "Blessed is he with nothing to say who can't be persuaded to say it." Later he conceded that "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Although he said that in French because his speech is true Technicolor going to black-and-white to 3-D-street expressions mixed with five-syllable words and fluent, self-taught French. When it comes to *bullshit*, he calls it exactly that.

As a multi-professional, he is a rampaging phenomenon, a one-man band, a Renaissance person, an iconoclast, a dynamo, a mystery, a force, and more. As a film maker he is a pioneer, a breaker of rules, a visionary, an inventor, merging the roles of artist and entrepreneur ("if you're gonna have a big mouth, you gotta be buttressed"), and, not the least, catalyst. He exploded on the film scene and pushed firmly closed doors open. He is strong, funny, confident, and he has shown that black is bountiful.

Melvin Van Peebles...or Melvin Van Movies as his actor/director son Mario affectionately calls him...the godfather of modern black cinema...who is he, what does he think, like, hate, fear, hope...?

"My existence is my commentary," he said the other night, those strangely light-reflecting eyes shining with mischief under over-weight eyelids, his body lean and mean in leather and denim, a cap perched jauntily on his head.

One clue to his life philosophy is partly visible. Around his lean, muscular neck is tattooed a necklace of dots, interrupted on the left the French words "couper sur la ligne" (cut along the dotted line), on the right by the English word "Cut" crossed out and replaced with "Lynch." Completing the picture is a tattoo on his right buttock where it says in Bambara, a West African warrior language, "Ni besse" ("if you can"). Lynch if you can...

The American Cinematheque in Hollywood celebrated Melvin Van Peebles one weekend, showing six feature films, two shorts, and one television mini-series ("Sophisticated Gents," almost not aired "until I went out and got one of those voodoo dolls and a bunch of pins and soon NBC changed head honchos").

Shown was his third and most widely known film, "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" from 1971. The film, shot in a mixture of verity and poetic style, complete with clashing colors and jive talk, portrays a sex artist who comes to the aid of a homeboy, who is being wantonly beaten by the police (a la the Rodney King videotape), and has to start running for his life. A priapic and vicious racial chase ensues, where the viewer is drawn into explosive violence as well as gamy and frequently hilarious sex scenes.

Finally, a sensuous, sexually assertive black male had made his way to the movie screen after decades of comic asexual black male characters—another Van Peebles first.

Pointing out that the film made several millions "before three white people had seen it," he shrugs off both the praise and the criticism leveled at this and other films of his. "If I needed approval, I'd never have done any of what I've done... I aim for audiences, not critics. And the audiences come... Because my films are not things I made up so they could chop my head off. What's on the screen is what I see. This is not fantasy, this is reality."

ILLUSTRATION BY BILL SKURSKI

He grins when he recalls his Machiavellian way of financing the film which followed on the heels of his satirical "Watermelon Man" where Godfrey Cambridge plays a white bigot who wakes up one morning to discover that he has become coal-black overnight. Van Peebles had saved both his salary and his expense money from that film. Then he walked into a lab, where people knew he was connected to a big studio "and therefore wanted to bond with me." He told them with a multitude of gestures and winks that he had met this chick and would "like to shoot, you know, a little picture."

Thinking he meant a small porno film for private use, his credit was extended, and he went on to make "Sweetback," borrowing \$50,000 from Bill Cosby during post-production.

Looking for a fast-working, problem-

free actor, he ended up with himself in the title role, playing with such gusto that allegedly his sex scenes frequently went over the simulation line.

In other words, he produced, directed, scored, edited, and starred in the film, which employed a great number of black technicians.

He speculates on how the film would look, had he not exerted full control over it. The title would have been translated into "white-ese": "The Ballad of the Indomitable Sweetback, eh? And as Sweetback is running toward Mexico and freedom, right before the border, across the dusty road, there would be a little girls with a hula hoop. A big truck is coming from the other direction. The girl doesn't see the truck, the truck doesn't see her. He dives in, saves her and gets his legs broken in the process. The sheriff appears. 'Well, nigger, we're gonna tell the judge

about that and he's gonna go easy on you.' Fade out."

In his film, Sweetback makes it across the border and these words appear on the screen: "Watch out! A baadassss nigger is coming back to collect some dues."

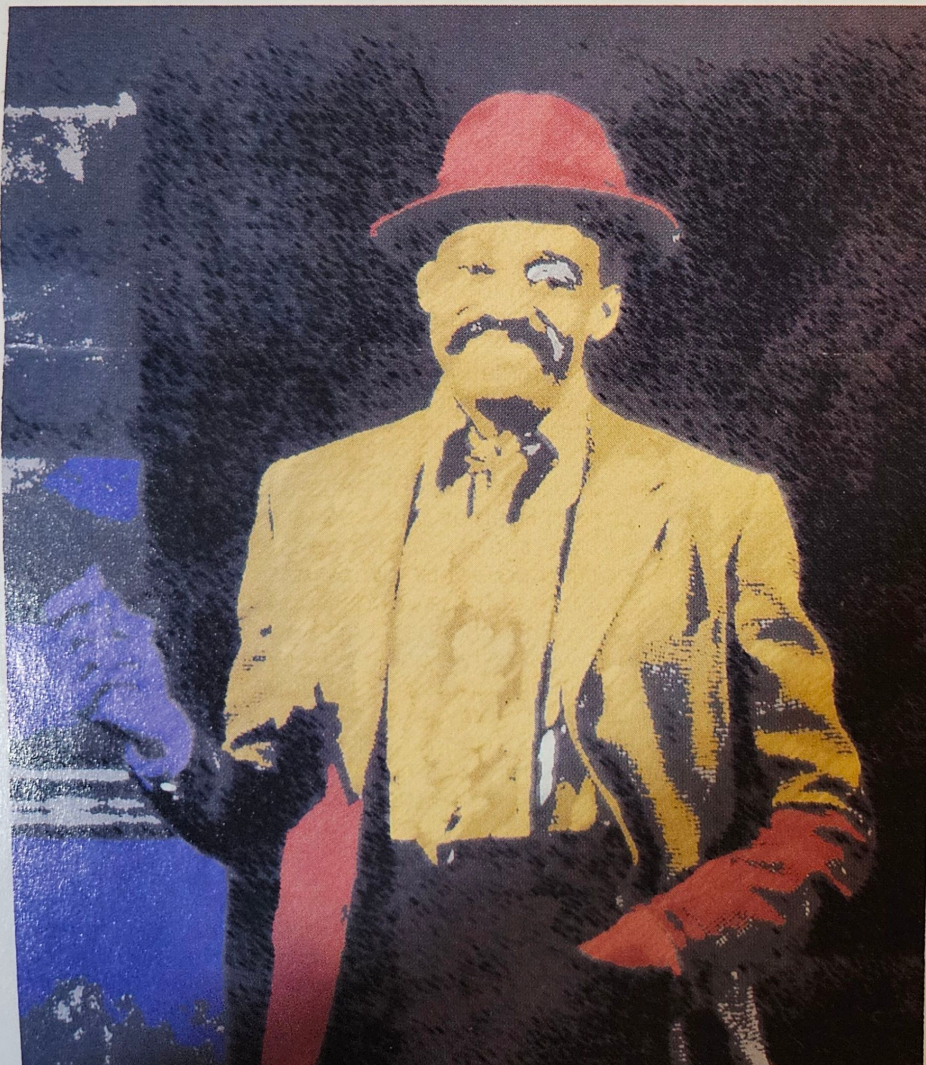
"The message of the film is that if you can get it together and stand up to the Man, you can win."

He does not talk much about his childhood ("too short for baseball, too nervous to steal"), but film books reveal that he was born in Chicago on August 21, 1932, the son of a tailor, that he graduated from high school in 1949, and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English literature from Ohio Wesleyan in 1953. He then joined the Air Force and became a navigator for three and half years. After a brief stint in Mexico as a painter, he moved to San Francisco where the only job he could find was as gripman on a cable car. He wrote a photo essay book about cable cars and was promptly fired when it came out, although he had never been late nor absent from work.

His impulse to make movies came "not from love but from disgust." Seeing some movie with black people, he was appalled by the blatant untruth. "I wanted to jump the bullshit and get to reality. Black people need a mirror they can watch themselves in, a mirror the white man can't distort."

He began to make shorts, knowing nothing about film making, composing music on a kazoo or humming the score. "I glued them together in a closet. Editing? Didn't know what it was. I knew nothing. But then—what's so bad about not knowing?"

"We have to do things ourselves. I wanted to jump the bullshit and get to reality. Black people need a mirror they can watch themselves in, a mirror the white man can't distort."



At one time he held three jobs to support his movie making and took in a roomer. His wife—he was married and had two kids—asked him, "What would you do if I slept with the roomer?" "Raise his rent," was his prompt reply.

He took off for Europe in 1959, studied astronomy on a scholarship in the Netherlands and acted with the Dutch National Theater. His marriage broke up, and he hitched a ride to Paris where he used to sing and dance on street corners. Having mastered the language, he worked as a crime reporter, although he will sometimes say that he survived by living off women. He edited a Gallic edition of *Mad* and wrote novels, which were translated into French, such as "A Bear for the F.B.I."—about a boy's awakening to prejudice, education and sex; "The Chinaman of the 14th district" about striking electrical workers telling stories; "The True American," a comic novel about a black man and a white man who meet in hell, "A Party in Harlem" which was the basic for the musical play, later the movie, "Don't Play Us Cheap."

He discovered an actual law in France, guaranteeing partial financing for any "French author" who wanted to film his novel. He became a French author by writing the novel "La Permission" in flamboyant French and made it into his first feature film, "The Story of a Three Day Pass," a tender love story about a black G.I. and a young French woman. It was released in 1967. "I got in at the top because no one would let me in at the bottom."

The movie was accepted to the San Francisco Film Festival—as a French movie. So the festival officials put on

ties and went to meet this exciting new French director—and off the plane stepped a cocky black American. Embarrassment reigned.

Hollywood sat up and took notice, and he made "Watermelon Man" for Columbia in 21 days, doing things his way. While the studio wanted the lead to be a white actor in blackface, Van Peebles found that ridiculous since the man was black for most of the film. Instead Godfrey Cambridge played the initial scenes in whiteface. Nor did he agree to the man becoming white in the end, making it like a dream. He won again.

He had become the very first black man to have complete creative control over a million dollar film made in Hollywood. What did he learn? "I learned that people deal in compromises."

The film led to a three film option with Columbia studios, but instead he

made "Sweetback" for his own production company, Yah, Inc. ("To make it easy to answer the phone, 'Yah!'")

Then nobody wanted it. "Black audiences will be angry," they said. "They'll see what's going on, what's happening to them." But black people knew what was going on—I recorded the truth, what we all knew."

The only distributor he could find was on the brink of bankruptcy and only two theaters, one in Detroit, one in Atlanta, Georgia, would show the film.

"The first night in Detroit they took in \$7,500 and had to open the mezzanine in the theater which hadn't been opened in fifteen years. The distributor was in the black again."

Young film makers tend to crowd around him, asking advice. "Make your movie," is all he will say. "I've always used my own voice and told the story I wanted to tell. Not knowing the rules,

"I've never gotten offers commensurate with what I can do. You just go on. After all, I'm not into the business for the money. I'm into the money for the business."

